

SECTION I

Helping Empower Communities

The Environmental Justice Program at EPA Region 9



Executive Order #12898 on Environmental Justice was signed by President Clinton in February 1994 to focus Federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions in minority populations and low-income populations.

Environmental justice is defined by the U.S. EPA as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no groups of people, including racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.

- EPA Environmental Justice Strategy, 1992

What is Environmental Justice?

People who talk about environmental justice imagine all communities having an equally high degree of environmental protection; when safe and healthy environments for people to live, to work and to play in are universal. But we have not yet reached that point. The goal of environmental justice is to ensure that all people, regardless of race, national origin or income are protected from the impacts of environmental hazards. Environmental justice is about real people facing real problems and designing practical solutions to address challenging environmental issues.

Environmental Justice communities are identified as those where residents are predominantly minorities or low-income; where residents have been excluded from the environmental policy setting or decision making process; where they are subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards; and where residents experience disparate implementation of environmental regulations, requirements, practices and activities in their communities.

The environmental justice movement was started by people, primarily people of color, who sought to address the inequity of environmental protection services in their communities. Grounded in the struggles of the 1960s civil rights movement, citizens from many walks of life emerged to bring attention to the environmental inequities facing millions of underrepresented people. Communities rose to sound the alarm about public health hazards which posed an immediate danger to the lives of their families, their communities and themselves.

The EPA Environmental Justice Program

In 1992, EPA created the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) and local programs in each of the ten regions to address environmental justice issues. Subsequently, Executive Order #12898 titled "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations" was signed by the President on February 11, 1994 with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities.

Since its beginning in 1992, the Environmental Justice program in Region 9 has grown dramatically. The program currently has seven full-time staff, as well as liaisons in each of the regions' divisions. The mainstay of the program has always been providing direct financial assistance to communities through the Environmental Justice Small Grant Program. In addition, the Region 9 Environmental Justice Team provides technical advice and consultation to community residents and brings issues of concern to the attention of relevant EPA Divisions and staff. An additional critical part of the Team's work is providing leadership on Environmental Justice to other Federal agencies. The team works to make the Federal government's resources available to communities in need.

For more information on Environmental Justice, call the Region 9 information line at 415/744-1565 or check the Internet for a large selection of sites dedicated to Environmental Justice. The EPA's Environmental Justice Web page is located at <http://www.epa.gov/oeca/oelj>.

The Role of Environmental Justice Small Grants

The Small Grant Program was started five years ago to provide financial assistance to community-based and grassroots organizations, churches, or other non-profit organizations and federally recognized tribal governments that are working to address environmental justice issues in their communities. (For a complete summary of the national and regional budgets, see Appendix B.) The program focuses on ensuring that the people who are most affected by environmental problems can be leaders in identifying and implementing solutions.

The specific goal of this grant program is to support projects in low-income communities and communities of color that are working to:

1. Identify necessary improvements in communication

and coordination among all stakeholders; to facilitate better communication and information exchange; and to create partnerships among stakeholders.

2. Build the capacity of communities

to identify local environmental justice issues; and enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and participation by affected communities.

3. Enhance community understanding of environmental and public health information

and generate new information on pollution in low income communities or communities of color.

The Purpose of this Report

This report highlights how EPA Region 9's Small Grant Program is helping to promote environmental justice in communities that are disproportionately impacted by environmental problems. Many of these projects fill a gap in environmental protection that is not being addressed by EPA, state or local agencies, or other organizations. This report highlights successful projects as models for communities facing similar problems or issues.

Another goal of this report is to show how these small federal investments in communities yield significant results. This relatively small amount of money dedicated to low-income communities and communities of color has gone a long way towards effective immediate action and long term solutions to environmental problems. This report highlights the progress made in reaching environmental justice goals and the many other results of the program.

The EPA Region 9 Environmental Justice Team also interviewed representatives of approximately 20 organizations who have completed projects funded through the Environmental Justice Small Grant Program in order to find out how successfully they met their objectives. Final reports submitted by grant recipients, as well as newsletters and other products produced with the funds, contributed to this evaluation of the first five years of the program. This report highlights the feedback gained through this evaluation.

We believe this report provides a strong case for continuing this effective small grant program.

"Working with organizations through the environmental justice small grant program has provided EPA with an invaluable education about environmental justice problems and solutions. This program embodies many of the approaches to environmental protection that EPA is promoting – community-based environmental protection, real-time environmental monitoring, greater attention to childrens' health and environmental justice."

Felicia Marcus,
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BorderLinks

